THE FUTILE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS
NOVEMBER 7, 2004

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Psalm 103
1 Corinthians 13:1–13
Luke 18:18–36

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
Luke 18:18 (NRSV)

Socrates had it wrong; It is not the unexamined
but finally the uncommitted life that is not worth living.
Descartes too was mistaken; "*Coqito ergo sum*"—"I think therefore I am"?
Nonsense. "*Amo ergo sum*"—"I love therefore I am."
Or, as with unconscious eloquence St. Paul wrote,
"Now abide faith, hope, and love these three; and the greatest of these is love."

I believe that. I believe it is better not to live than not to love.

William Sloane Coffin
Credo

On a warm September Sunday, I read a long and fascinating article in the *New York Times* magazine, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness," the subtitle: "When It Comes to Personal Satisfaction in Life, You Can't Really Know What You Want."

That, I thought to myself, will preach. And so when I was looking at the calendar and schedule for the fall, I chose November 7 for a sermon on happiness, on what the gospel of Jesus Christ has to say on the subject. It did not occur to me that November 7 would be five days after November 2, Election Day, and that the chances were that a significant portion of people sitting in the pews this Sunday were not going to be happy at all.

We get deeply involved in the election of a president and deeply invested because we deeply love the world and this nation of ours. We care deeply about human life and peace and poverty and national security, and when our side loses, whichever it is, we hurt deeply and we grieve almost as if we had lost a dear one. It was C. S. Lewis who taught that to love anyone or

anything, even an animal, is to risk having your heart broken. And to make absolutely sure you won't be hurt, you must never love anyone.

Back in 1976, the day after Jimmy Carter was elected, a prominent, elderly woman in the congregation I was serving in Columbus, Ohio, Lois Scott, witty, opinionated, and Republican, called me. "Reverend Buchanan," she said, "the Democrats have won, and as my pastor, you need to know that I think this is close to the end of the world." This year I received tearful calls like Miss Scott's twenty-five years ago, and I tried to assure the devastated callers who had worked very hard in this election that the world will not end.

Last Monday a political pundit wrote that no matter who won on Tuesday, one-half of the American people were going to be crushed.

Moral values were critical. It was the political philosopher Rousseau who said that the person who would separate politics from morals fails to understand either. Of course moral values played an important role in how people voted.

The issue before us now, and it is critical, is whose notion of morality will play out politically. It is not necessarily a partisan issue. But a progressive vision for the country is no longer a given. James Dobson, head of Focus on the Family, a large, very influential lobby on the religious right, took a call from the White House on Wednesday, thanking him for his support. Dobson warned the White House that he and his constituency expect action now on their notion of a Christian moral agenda. That would be

- a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage or same sex unions
- overturn Roe v. Wade
- stop stem cell research
- remake the Supreme Court

Dobson has every right to that agenda.

What I object to and what is now important for both Democrats and Republicans to know and to tell the president and Congress is that there are plenty of us Christians who do not think that right wing agenda represents Christian faith, Christian hope.

We come to different conclusions about these issues—same-sex relations, freedom of reproductive choice, the role of the United States in the world—not by ignoring the Bible and the faith, but precisely because we are convinced the Bible and the faith lead us to those conclusions.

I feel strongly about stem cell research. I have experience with genetic anomalies. I find immoral the intentional discarding of embryos created in

fertility clinics—embryos that could be used, that are desperately needed, but cannot today be used and instead are discarded—as a product of the conservative evangelical and Roman Catholic position on abortion.

We need to have a strenuous and civil conversation about this and other moral issues, not a presumption by one side that there is only one Christian position and theirs is it.

It is important that people who have an alternate vision, regardless of their party, not give up hope now. You, we, may be a minority, but minorities are important. Studs Terkel says prophetic minorities are responsible for most of the important changes in human history. Terkel is 92 and ill, a Chicago icon whose most recent book is *Hope Dies Last*. He got that title, he said, from a Hispanic woman who spent most of her life on the downside, on her knees in the fields, picking beans; she worked for years with Caesar Chavez. She said her motto was hope dies last.

So do not give up. Dig in, work hard, keep the vision, never give up hope.

Finally, as I always have, I will pray for the president. Please join me.

We pray, O God, for our President, George W. Bush, this morning. Make him wise and just in all his decisions. Give him strength for the carrying out of his responsibilities. Bless his family. We thank you for John Kerry and John Edwards, for the enormous investment they made. Be with them as they cope with disappointment. Be with Elizabeth Edwards particularly in the days ahead.

We pray, Lord of all time and all nations, for our nation. Heal our wounds, bring us together, inspire in us a new vision of your will and your kingdom on earth.

And now, startle us again with your truth and love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The phrase came from the mind and pen of Thomas Jefferson, thirty-three years old, asked by the Continental Congress in the summer of 1776 to write a Declaration of Independence.

Historian David McCullough, in his biography of John Adams, observes that the eloquent lines of Jefferson's second paragraph "would stand down the years affecting the human spirit as neither Jefferson nor anyone could have foreseen. . . . Jefferson had written for all time" (pp. 135–36).

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The pursuit of happiness: what do you suppose Jefferson meant by that phrase? Is it merely the right to be left alone to pursue whatever it is that produces pleasure? Jefferson was too much of a thinker for that. He was too busy pursuing his own happiness by doing things—reading, writing, talking, gardening, studying, building, inventing, taking upon himself enormous burdens and responsibilities—for his elegant phrase to mean the right to pursue whatever produces instant gratification.

It's a great question. What is the happiness we are free to pursue? I almost hate to admit it, but one of my favorite comedians was the late Rodney Dangerfield, wrinkled, disheveled, neurotic, eyes darting back and forth, adjusting his tie. He made a career out of self-deprecation, self-humiliation, thought well of by no one, loved by no one, respected by no one. A reporter once tried to persuade him to be serious about what, after all, is a profound issue. "Mr. Dangerfield," he asked, "are you a happy person?" expecting, I suppose, an answer like "Yes, I'm happy when I make people laugh. I'm happy giving the gift of laughter and joy to my audience." Instead, Dangerfield, with consummate consistency responded, "Of course not. I'm not happy, I've never been happy. My whole life has been a disaster, a downer."

What is happiness?

Perhaps you saw that article in the *New York Times* magazine "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness" (September 7, 2004). Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard, has collaborated with several other scholars from around the country to try to do a definitive study of happiness. They are examining the decision-making process that shapes our sense of well-being —how we predict what we think will make us happy or unhappy—and how we feel after the actual experience.

The project started when Gilbert and a professor friend were eating lunch and complaining about how badly things were going in their lives generally, in their marriages, careers. Gilbert remembers thinking, "It's all so small. It's really about money."

They determined to find out what makes for happiness. "People ask why I study happiness," Gilbert says. "I answer, why study anything else? It's the holy grail. We're studying the thing that all human action is directed toward."

The article was long on interesting analysis but woefully short on helpful conclusions, probably because they didn't let Jesus into the project.

They do conclude that while we make most decisions on the basis of what we think will make us happy, we are wrong mostly: a new car, new kitchen, will not make us nearly as happy, nor for as long, as we expected.

Gilbert calls the gap between what we predict and what we ultimately experience "the impact bias," and our mistakes in choosing what we think will give us pleasure he calls "miswanting."

He and his colleagues conclude that if we had a better understanding of "impact bias," we would tend to invest our resources in things that really produce happiness. "We might, for instance, take more time being with friends than more time making money."

That's as close as the project comes to prescribing anything. I wish they had read a little story in the Bible about a man who came to Jesus once and asked his advice on the subject. The man didn't, of course, say, "What should I do to produce happiness?" He asked, "Good Teacher, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" Scholars are not sure what he meant by "eternal life." The Judaism of the day did not have a precise notion of life beyond this life, beyond time, in eternity. So he probably was not asking, "What do I need to do to go to heaven when I die?" The Hebrew notion of salvation as wholeness, health and well-being, peace, shalom, is probably closer. What do I need to do to live my life as fully as possible, to be as genuinely and authentically human as I possibly can be? What can I do to add the quality of God's kingdom, God's eternal realm, to my life now, to become a citizen of God's realm right now and to know it? What can I do to know at the end of the day that I have lived fully and honestly and that my life mattered?

Jesus' answer is the orthodox formula of the day: obey the commandments. "I've done that," the man replies. "There must be something more, because I'm not living, experiencing the authentic, real, eternal life." Jesus' response is stunning: "Sell all you have, give it all to the poor and come follow me." The man isn't happy with that answer at all because he is rich.

As the man slowly walks away, Jesus turns to the disciples and says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God."

There is probably no more countercultural statement in the entire Bible than that. Beginning that very day, his followers have pushed back at that statement, starting with the disciples themselves. They weren't rich. Far from it. But they understood perfectly well that if what he said was true, no one but the abject, desperately poor is getting in. So they asked, "Then who

can be saved?" And Jesus said, "What is impossible with mortals is possible with God," which I interpret to mean, "Stop worrying about your ultimate salvation. It's in God's hands, not yours. And God's hands are kind and gracious and merciful. Your priority is your one and only life and how you will live it."

There is a wonderful *New Yorker* cartoon that shows a cocktail lounge with several businessmen sitting at the bar with their end-of-the-day drinks. The men are intently watching the evening news on the television set over the bar and hear the newscaster say, "Jitters on Wall Street today over rumors that Alan Greenspan said, 'A rich man can as soon enter heaven as a camel fit through the eye of a needle." (See Thomas Long, *Testimony*, p. 129)

It is so radical his followers have been pushing back, arguing with and about this text from the very day he said it. Maybe he didn't really say "camel." After all, the words for "rope" and "camel" are similar in Greek, so maybe a scribe copying the ancient text by candlelight got it wrong: easier to put a fat thread through the eye of a needle—difficult, but plausible. Or maybe there was a little hole called the eye of a needle in the city wall through which a late-arriving traveler could enter after the gates were closed, by unloading his camel, forcing it to its knees, then getting behind it and pushing and shoving it through. That has always been a favorite. Preachers love it on Stewardship Sunday. You can get into the kingdom by off-loading some of your goods—as in a generous pledge to the church. Sadly, this interpretation seems to have been invented in the ninth century, but it is certainly creative.

I think Jesus means to address the man's real question and real human need. The man cannot give his wealth away. That is his problem. He is not free. Someone said we don't own anything we cannot give away; it owns us. That's the problem here. Distinguished theologian Paul Tillich said that our God is whatever we call our ultimate concern. This man's ultimate concern is his wealth, his stuff.

The wealthy man's problem was that he had invested in the wrong thing for his happiness, or his salvation. The impact bias was clear. It wasn't working. What he was committed to wasn't providing what he so deeply wanted. But he couldn't change.

My friend Hector Mendez, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Havana, Cuba, was here in the pulpit on World Communion Sunday. On several occasions I have heard Americans, including myself, trying to be supportive and saying sympathetic things about how difficult it must be to remain faithful in a culture that is officially hostile to religion, where saying the wrong thing from the pulpit can result in a government investigation and interrogation, where churches were not allowed to publish educational

materials, evangelize, or provide social services. More than once I have watched Hector patiently listen and then gently and wisely say, “It may be easier for us in Cuba to remain faithful than for you who live with such overwhelming and seductive abundance.”

The simple truth is we are all big camels. The simple truth is that even the less affluent of us are wealthy by anybody’s standards.

But notice that Jesus doesn’t criticize the man’s wealth as the preacher is tempted to do. He certainly doesn’t criticize his religion. He simply wants to go deeper—to this man’s heart and soul, to that place deep inside where his fundamental values and commitments are, where the freedom to love and give life away resides.

Presbyterian theologian George Stroup, in a scholarly treatment of the doctrine of salvation, quotes John Calvin, who said, “Our minds, stunned by the empty dazzlement of riches, powers, and honors, become so deadened that they can see no further.” “The issue, then as now,” observes Stroup, “is not finally a matter of what one believes, but as the Bible recognizes, what one loves most fervently” (*Before God*, p. 317).

The man who came to Jesus with his profound question was not free—not free to give, not free to love. Jesus, I think, wanted him to loosen up, to release his tight grip on his possessions, loosen up on the security he assumed his wealth was buying him, loosen up his constricted life so focused on maintaining and growing his portfolio. Jesus wanted him to learn to be human again and vulnerable again. Jesus wanted him to think hard about his happiness, his life’s meaning and purpose, and invest his attention and resources and energy and hope and love there. And that, I believe, is what Jesus wants for you and me.

It is All Saints’ Day, and I observe it personally by remembering and naming my saints, our balcony people, who nurtured us, taught us, brought the person that-had-not-yet-appeared out of us. And it occurred to me that among our saints are those who showed us how to love, taught us how to live our lives thoroughly by loving deeply and passionately. I found myself thinking a lot about my family during these past weeks of the election, my uncles and cousins who went off to war for this country in the 1940s—Jack, Frank, and Dick, who didn’t come home, who loved this country enough to die for it. I thought about my father, a passionate Republican who despised FDR and taught me to say, “Wendell Wilkie” (the Republican candidate for President in 1940)—my first words, he proudly used to tell me and my mother, who registered Republican to keep peace in the house and voted Democratic every election. I thought about how deeply they loved life and this country and how strenuously they would have disagreed and argued

about this election and, in the process, would have continued to teach me about patriotism and how to love.

I thought about the gift my family gave me of knowing that to live is to love, and not to love, not to care enough to be vulnerable, to risk losing, is not really to live at all.

That's who saints are. You can remember them and name them too, the ones who taught you to love, the ones who taught all of us the gospel, that to live you must love enough to put your life on the line, to live you must risk everything: Martin Luther King, Bishop Desmund Tutu, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

William Sloane Coffin, not well, thinking about the end of life and writing,

> Descartes too was mistaken; "*Coqito ergo sum*"—"I think therefore I am"? Nonsense. "*Amo ergo sum*"—"I love therefore I am."

That's what Jesus meant when he told a man one day that he needed to learn how to love if he wanted to live eternally.

"Love," Coffin wrote, "is its own reward. . . . The rewards of loving are to become yet more vulnerable, more tender, more caring."

And, Jesus said, more alive.

Amen.